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INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 002563

NOFORN
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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/24/2019
TAGS: JQ PGOV PREL
SUBJECT: JORDAN: KING DISSOLVES PARLIAMENT AND CALLS FOR
EARLY ELECTIONS

REF: A. A. AMMAN 2097
¶B. B. AMMAN 2098

Classified By: Ambassador R. Stephen Beecroft for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)
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¶1. (S//NF) SUMMARY: King Abdullah issued two royal decrees late yesterday, the first to dissolve parliament effective today and the second to call for early parliamentary elections. The reasons behind the dissolution include an impasse between parliament and the government, and increased public discontent, a combination that gave the King an opportunity to dissolve parliament and enact political reforms. The constitution stipulates a 4 month timeframe for elections and the convening of a new parliament, but Embassy contacts imply that the stipulation may not be met. (Parliaments in 2007 and 2001 also did not meet the 4 month requirement, because Abdullah can constitutionally extend the timeframe for up to 3 additional months under special circumstances. Senior Jordanian officials told the Ambassador that the lack of a functioning electoral law qualified as a special circumstance.) Reactions to the decision have been largely positive, but that is likely to erode among the King's East Bank constituency in the coming months if reforms become a political reality. While the dissolution of parliament is not a surprise, the timing of the decision was unexpected by Embassy contacts outside a small group of senior Jordanian officials. The Embassy assesses that the Jordanian government is sincere in its efforts to reform the electoral system, but it will face serious challenges.

¶2. (S//NF) In discussing the option of dissolution, Royal Court and government contacts have told the Ambassador over the past several months that the reasons supporting dissolution are threefold:

-- Relations between parliament and the government have broken down to the point where no serious legislation could move through the system. The few laws that were passed had been so distorted during the amendment process that the law as written was meaningless.

-- The public and the press were largely unhappy with parliament to such an extent that the public mood was affecting the King's own popularity. Abdullah was seen as the only one who could break the impasse.

-- The lack of meaningful legislative movement and the public's discontent with parliament offered the King an opportunity to dissolve parliament and enact meaningful electoral reforms.

What Comes Next?

¶3. (S//NF) Under the constitution, elections must be held and the new parliament must convene within 4 months of the

date of dissolution. If elections do not take place within that timeframe, and the King does not extend it, the constitution says that the dissolved House will reassemble and assume its full constitutional powers as if the dissolution had not taken place. However, parliaments in 2007 and 2001 were granted an extended period, and the new parliament is likely to benefit from a similarly long timeframe.

¶4. (S//NF) Without a parliament, the government can constitutionally implement so-called "temporary" laws (reftel A and B) and is likely to move on several laws that were caught in the legislative impasse before elections take place. Court and government contacts anticipate that elections will be held during summer 2010. At a minimum, this action will include introducing a budget, a provisional income tax law--a measure that the now-dissolved parliament rejected during its last session--and a provisional electoral law, which is already drafted and ready to be used, according to one Embassy contact.

Dissolution Was Anticipated

¶5. (S//NF) Many Embassy contacts outside senior Jordanian government circles are surprised by the timing of last night's decision, but the move was a long considered measure by the King, Royal Court Chief Nasser Lozi, and GID Director Mohammad Raqqad. All available contacts have expressed their approval. NGO, Ministry of Interior, and PSD contacts have all endorsed the decision and say it is a positive move by

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the King that has been long awaited. (The agreement amongst such disparate organizations highlights the fact that observers are seeing what they want to see in terms of what the dissolution means for them.) Embassy contacts at Jordanian think tanks and universities say there are no regrets over the decision. Even the Secretary General of the now-dissolved parliament, Fayed Al-Shawabkah, says the King is exercising his constitutional powers and that it was motivated by a real desire to improve politics in Jordan. Popular opinion also appears to be solidly in favor of the decision.

Decision Is Not Without Some Critics

¶6. (S//NF) Despite a largely positive reaction to parliament's dissolution, some opposition lawmakers are accusing the government of ousting parliament in order to pass legislation that the parliament would not. Others say the decision came too late--prominent opposition figure Tajun Faysal speculates that it "was no longer popular" for that reason.

¶7. (S//NF) Comment: The Embassy believes this move represents the best opportunity for meaningful structural political reform in Jordan, but reform will be highly controversial and we expect that enormous pressure will be applied by some elements of Jordanian society to limit it. Although the King's decision to dissolve parliament has been largely popular, its popularity is likely to fade quickly among East Bankers if meaningful reforms actually take place. However, if meaningful reforms do not happen, it probably will undermine the government's credibility among Palestinian-Jordanians and others seeking a genuine voice in the Jordanian political system.

Beecroft